



Tribune photo by Walter Naei

Providence-St. Mel's Lowell Hamilton [left] shows his moves during summer league play at St. Benedict.

Playing under a microscope

By Jerry Shnay

THIS IS AUGUST and in the upside-down world of basketball, things are pretty "dead."

If you're a college basketball coach, you can't wink, peek, poke, prod, smile at, talk to, bump into, run over or consort with, let alone look at a high school player.

August is when Illinois' top high school basketball players can play games and hone their skills supposedly without a baleful glance from a sharp-eyed basketball coach in the stands. But beware the shorter days of September.

There are five seasons in basketball—fall, winter, spring, summer and recruiting. The last is the longest. Recruiting goes on all year and it is in the period between the end of school in June and the beginning of school in September that most of the hard work is done.

SUMMER IS when the basketball camps flourish. August is a time of mix and matchup for recruiters, who are working especially hard this year because Illinois' Class of '85 promises to be one of the best in years.

"By Sept. 1, we'll have a list of which players we go after," said De Paul coach Joey Meyer. "This is the month to evaluate all the players we've seen this summer throughout the country."

During the summer, for both players and coaches, basketball is just one all-star camp after another. If a player wanted to, and was good enough, he could play games from Princeton, N.J., to Milledgeville, Ga., to Pittsburgh to Rensselaer, Ind., to Las Vegas. You could see the country, but more important, the country could see you.

A six-week period, from June 15

Class of 1985

Illinois high school basketball's Class of 1985 will be one for the books—perhaps the best graduating class in state history. Periodically through the coming year, The Tribune will write about these players as they move toward college and the future. In the second of the series, members of the Class of '85 and their coaches look back on the players' performances at national summer camps—camps closely scrutinized by college recruiters.

through July 31, takes players and coaches all over the country. If this is Tuesday, where am I, coach?

"I **DON'T THINK** our assistants, "Mo" (Jim Molinari) and [Jim] Platt missed many camps," Meyer said. "They'd call me up every day and sometimes none of us knew what state either of us was in."

There's no mistaking what state every recruiter wants to be in when the regular season begins. Illinois has, potentially, its best crop of athletes since the fabled class of 1979, which included Mark Aguirre, Isaiah Thomas and Darryl Walker, just to name three.

This year's wish list includes 6-foot-7-inch Lowell Hamilton of Providence-St. Mel, 6-8 Ben Wilson of Simeon, 6-9 Melvin McCants of Mt. Carmel, 6-6 Jerry

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Class of '85

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Jones of Hillcrest, 6-8 Ed Horton of Springfield Lanphier, 6-11 Gary Leonard of Belleville East, 5-11 Tracy Dildy of King and 6-4 Gerald Hayward of Hyde Park.

Hamilton and Wilson lead the pack, with Wilson being called the "top player in the country" by one scouting service. McCants and Jones aren't far behind.

HAMILTON HAS LED his school to the Class A state quarterfinals the last two years. Last season he set a state tournament record with 19 blocked shots in the three-game meet.

"But all I want to do this summer is enjoy myself," said Hamilton, who played on the same team with Wilson at the Athletes For Better Education national camp in Princeton, and went along for the ride in Las Vegas.

"I really didn't want to go to any camps," said Hamilton. "But then again, in a certain sense, I really wanted to go—but to go just to go on a trip and have fun. But everyone wants you to live up to a certain expectation. If you don't, they want to put you down."

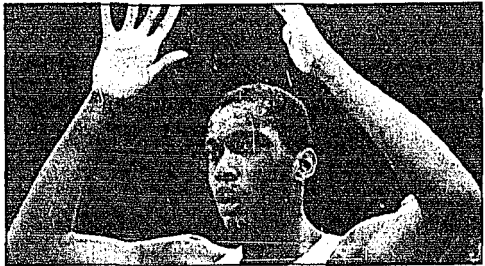
One athlete who went beyond that certain expectation was Hamilton's friend Wilson. Although Wilson was the key in his team's state championship last March, he blossomed at the AFBE camp, drawing critical raves from coaches and basketball fanatics, who hadn't seen him play.

"**I LIKED IT,**" Wilson said of his summer experiences. "You got to play against all the best players. No, there wasn't any pressure on me to play well."

Wilson was suddenly thrust into the "franchise" player category this summer when one scouting service named him the

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—Mt. Carmel's
Melvin McCants



top player in the country off his camp achievements. He's a lithe, slippery forward, able to snake his way through the forest of arms and legs for baskets. As an off guard, he has a soft, deadly 15-foot shot.

Mt. Carmel's McCants attended the AFBE camp and, on the way home, dropped off for a few days at the 5-Star Camp in Pittsburgh.

McCants, who says he wants to be an engineer, has narrowed his college choices to three. But he insists his first choice may not be Purdue, which is rumored to be in the forefront for his services. "At first I didn't like the idea of being recruited," he says with a smile. "But I really don't mind it right now. It's kinda fun for me."

McCants said he will have his mother and his coach, Ed McQuillen, help him choose the school, "but I still have to make my own decision."

JONES, WHO has been a varsity starter at Hillcrest since his first game as a freshman, has a different opinion of the recruiting process.

"Is it fun? Yes and no," he said. "I've got a decision to make. One of the things

I'll have to find out is if a school can help me or if they'll treat me like just another piece of meat. I know there are schools that can say one thing and mean another."

Jones, a burly 6-6 senior, didn't have a sensational summer camp experience like Wilson or Hamilton. And, he said he heard about it. "I'm glad they said things about me. I know if they aren't interested in me, I'm not interested in them," said Jones.

ACCORDING TO Hillcrest's first-year coach Tom Cappel, Jones needs to improve his grades. "I'm taking school more seriously now," says Jones.

It is at the camps, which cater to the coaches, where the serious evaluations are done.

"You can get a head start on the talent," says Rich Falk of Northwestern. "With the early signing date in November, the recruiting process speeds up. There is also pressure upon the top players to sign early."

Summer basketball is not just for the making of a superstar reputation, Falk insists. "There are a lot of good kids who, for one reason or another, don't go to

summer camp."

IN SOME PARTS of the country, AAU summer basketball has taken the place of summer camps. "I can't even recruit some of these kids after they get through with AAU ball," moaned Bob Paschal, Southwestern Louisiana basketball coach. "They get everything paid for playing AAU ball and a lot of them want something from you when you talk to them."

Hamilton will probably announce early. Wilson won't. That's straight from the mouths of their respective coaches.

"By Sept. 1, Lowell will give me a list of schools," said St. Mel coach Tom Shields. That list will include (in alphabetical order) De Paul, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa State, Kentucky, Louisville, Michigan, North Carolina State, Notre Dame and Purdue. "From that list, he'll pick five schools to visit."

Hamilton will get help in his decision from his mother, Lovelyn, and Shields, but the coach is concerned his star still must make some tough decisions. "I think he'd rather avoid the whole recruiting scenario," said Shields.

WILSON WILL give his coach, Bob Hambric, his list of around eight schools "when I'm positive that I'd be comfortable at the school and if the school can help me and I can help the school."

All schools must go through Hambric, who said last spring that Wilson won't sign until the 1984-85 season is over. He believes in using Wilson as a lever to pry open some closed minds.

"College coaches make lots of mistakes recruiting," the outspoken Hambric said. "They look at the winner of the NCAA every year and figure that's the kind of player they need. They look at a type instead of looking at the way he plays. I want them [coaches] to see other players, too. If a player signs early, they usually forget about other good players."